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ABSTRACT

The aim of this presentation is to persuade early childhood educators that they can and should tell stories to children in their preschool classes, day care homes, or centers. The story of Scheherezade is retold in order to illuminate the points that: (1) traditional stories share a basic, satisfying structure which, regardless of the details of the particular story, asserts to the listener that, in some mysterious way, life makes sense; and (2) trustworthy relationships with others are possible. Children seek reassurance on these two points. It is suggested that one begin telling stories to children by selecting a story that involves physical imitation and simple verbal participation. Children will imitate both physically and emotionally. The reader can model the emotions of story characters with tone of voice, facial expression, and gestures. Readers can also watch and respond to emotions registered on children's faces, and ensure that no child becomes too upset. Additional guidelines and reflections are offered. An appendix provides a list of stories for beginning storytellers to tell to preschoolers that is arranged according to the age of the child. A storytelling bibliography of 14 items is also provided. (RH)

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YOU ARE A STORYTELLER!

Talk Presented at KAEYC Conference, 10/13/90
Conference Theme: "Good Beginnings Never End"
by Susan Wilcox, Storyteller

My object this afternoon is to persuade you that you can and you should use storytelling in your preschool classroom, or day care home or center. But rather than begin with logic and analysis, I'd like to begin with a story that is well over a thousand years old. Though this story offers an important moral teaching, its characters behave according to a more primitive moral standard than our own. Consequently, I reserve the story for adult audiences.

The Story of Scheherezade

It has been said, though only God knows the truth of all things, that there was once a very powerful old king. In fact, he was the king over all China and India. He had multitudes of soldiers, guards and servants. And he had two sons, both brave horsemen as well as affectionate brothers, named Shahriyar and Shahzeman. When the king died, Shahriyar, who was quite a bit older than his brother, assumed his father's throne, while Shahzeman became the king of distant Samarkand.

Shahriyar ruled so justly that he was well loved by all his subjects. He had reigned for twenty years, when one day he called in his prime minister, the Vizier, with a request. "Vizier, command my brother to come to visit me!"

"Your Majesty," replied the Vizier, "I suggest that you prepare rich gifts to be sent to your brother along with an eloquent letter of invitation. I shall be happy to present the letter to him in person."

King Shahriyar approved of this advice, and prepared a gift of fine horses whose bridles were ornamented with gold, silver, and jewels; strong male slaves; and beautiful women slaves. The Vizier assembled a caravan and set off across the desert to deliver the gifts and the invitation to Shahzeman.

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As the Vizier approached Samarkand, King Shahzeman sent noblemen and court officials to greet him. Presented to the king, the Vizier prayed for God's favor on all Shahzeman's undertakings, and kissed the ground in front of his throne. "Your brother, the glorious King Shahriyar, longs for you to come to visit him," said the Vizier, handing Shahzeman his brother's letter.

Shahzeman was eager for the visit, too, though he entertained the Vizier and his entourage for three days before they began the journey back. On the fourth day, Shahzeman sent his camels, mules, tents, baggage and servants, and set out. However, in the middle of the night, he remembered that there was a particularly beautiful and precious jewel he had intended to bring as a gift to Shahriyar. He had left it behind in his chamber. Impulsively, he rode alone back to his city and entered his room to fetch the jewel. There on his sumptious bed, Shahzeman's queen lay sleeping. To his horror, Shahzeman realized, there also lay sleeping one of the male servants. Furious, he drew his sword and killed them both as they slept. Taking the jewel, he rejoined the caravan.

Shahriyar was overjoyed to greet his brother, when he arrived at last. But Shahzeman's pleasure in the reunion was spoiled by grief and humiliation at his queen's infidelity. He barely touched the extravagant dishes as Shahriyar celebrated with feasting; the revelry only accentuated his gloomy mood. Finally, Shahriyar had an opportunity to ask the reason for his brother's sadness. Shahzeman would only explain that he had "an internal sore."

"Let's go out hunting tomorrow, my dear brother! Surely the hunt will divert you and raise your spirits." But Shahzeman refused, saying he would rather remain behind in his apartment.

Shahzeman sat by the window of his apartment that next day, looking out at the royal gardens. The door to the queen's apartment opened, and Shahriyar's wife came into the garden accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting. From another doorway, a group of men, household slaves, entered the garden. Shahzeman was astonished to see the queen, sitting beside the central fountain in the garden, summon one of the slaves to sit with her. From what followed, it became obvious that Shahriyar was no better off than Shahzeman with regard to his wife's fidelity.

Though concerned for his brother, Shahzeman was so relieved to learn that his suffering was not unique that he began to feel much better. The color came back into his cheeks and his appetite was restored. When Shahriyar returned from the hunt, he found his brother enjoying some supper.

"Oh my brother! How wonderful to see that you are indeed recovering from your malady. Tell me what has cured you," Shahriyar demanded. Shahzeman begged permission to explain only the cause of the depression, and not its cure. But when he had done so, Shahriyar was understandably even more insistent that his brother explain the cure. Reluctantly, Shahzeman related the events he had observed in the garden that afternoon.

"I must see this with my own eyes to believe it," said Shahriyar.

"That would be easy to arrange. Simply let it be known that you intend to go hunting again tomorrow. When your hunting pavilion is set up, retire to it and give orders that you are not to be disturbed. Then disguise yourself and return here to my apartment."

Shahriyar did so, and joined Shahzeman in his apartment in time to see that his brother's report was only too accurate.

Anguish overwhelmed Shahriyar. "Life is worthless to you and me, my brother. Our royal power is mockery. Let us end our lives rather than suffer such degradation."

"Oh my brother," Shahzeman counseled, "Perhaps your grief could be moderated as mine was. Perhaps we merely share the fate of all men."

"Then let us abandon these royal pretensions. We will disguise ourselves," Shahriyar proposed, "and search through the world to learn whether our faithless queens are exceptions, or whether all kings are victims of the deceptions of their wives."

After traveling far and wide, the disguised kings came one day to a meadow by the sea. A single, lofty tree grew there, beside a spring of fresh water. Shariyar and Shahzeman drank from the spring and had their lunch in the shade of the tree. As they rested, they noticed that the sea was disturbed by something. Though the weather was clear, the sea became dark and rough. Finally a huge black pillar of smoke arose

from the depths of the sea and approached the tree. Alarmed, the brothers lost no time climbing high into the tree to hide.

The smoky pillar condensed itself into the form of a gigantic Jinni carrying a sea chest on his head. He placed the chest under the tree and unlocked it. Inside was another box, this one secured with seven padlocks. When he had unfastened the inner box, the Jinni opened it and assisted a beautiful woman to step out onto the grass. She was as beautiful as the shining sun.

"My dear, I intend to take a rest here," the Jinni declared. The lady knelt on the grass and the Jinni lay down to sleep with his head on her lap.

Once he was asleep, the lady began to look around her and soon noticed the brothers hiding in the tree. She gently placed the Jinni's head on the ground, stood up, and beckoned to the brothers to come down to her. Shahriyar and Shahzeman begged her pardon but indicated they would prefer to remain in the tree. In her turn, the lady insisted they come down, "or I will waken this 'Efrit and he will tear you both limb from limb!"

Embarrassing as it is to recount, this lady had amorous ambitions for the afternoon. When she had fulfilled these ambitions (!), she reached into a pocket of her robes and pulled out a purse. Opening it, she showed the brothers a string on which she had collected ninety-eight signet rings. "Each of you must now give me a ring to add to my collection. This foolish Jinni stole me away from my fiance on the eve of my wedding. He has kept me deep in the sea inside these two boxes with all their locks. Yet I have managed to cheat him with each man who has given me a ring. Remember this, oh Kings: No power on earth can prevent a woman from doing what she is determined to do!"

Shahriyar and his brother were only too glad to give their rings and return to their respective kingdoms. Shahriyar's first act on returning was to have his queen beheaded. Then he adopted a routine which scandalized and horrified his subjects. Every afternoon he would marry a young lady, and the very next morning he would have his bride beheaded. This way, he assured himself, he would be protected from betrayal.

Each day, the Vizier was charged with the responsibility of finding Shahriyar a bride. After three years, all the young ladies who had not fled the city had been married and killed. The Vizier searched in vain for a candidate. At last he returned home, dreading the necessity of admitting his failure to the king.

The Vizier himself had two daughters. When they saw their father's distress, they asked the cause, and whether they could help him. "God forbid that one of you should marry the king!" the Vizier replied.

The Vizier's older daughter Scheherezade was wise as well as beautiful. She had collected a library of a thousand volumes of history, poetry, and learning (and in those days, books were all hand copied, and extremely difficult to acquire). And she had read those thousand books. She insisted that she be presented as the king's bride that day.

Naturally, the Vizier refuse to permit her, but she countered him, "At the least I will be a sacrifice and save the life of some other Moslem girl. But, if I am fortunate, I believe I may have a plan that will save my life and put an end to our king's outrageous custom." Finally, her father agreed to allow her to marry Shahriyar.

Scheherezade would need the help of her younger sister Dunyzade to carry out her plan. "I will send for you tonight, Dunyzade. When there is an opportunity to speak, please ask me if I will tell you a story to help pass the time more pleasantly."

At the customary time, Scheherezade was presented to the king. She broke down in tears. Shahriyar asked her why she cried, and she told him, "I have a younger sister, your Majesty. Would you be so kind as to send for her, so that I can enjoy her company during my last hours?" Shahriyar promised to do so.

Later that night Dunyzade was shown into the royal apartment. She waited, and when there was a chance, she asked Scheherezade for a story, as she had been instructed to do. "Most virtuous King," said Scheherezade, "May I have your permission to tell a story as my sister requests?" Shahriyar was restless that night, and quite willing to hear a story.

Scheherezade's story was complex and fascinating, and she had just reached the most dramatic part when she stopped, in mid-sentence, to observe that dawn was

lightening the sky. It was time for the king to leave her and turn to the day's business.

"Oh my sister! Your story is so wonderful! If only we could hear the rest of it!" exclaimed Dunyzade. Shahriyar himself had enjoyed the story so much that he agreed to delay Scheherezade's execution until the next morning.

In the end, the resourceful Scheherezade, one of the most famous storytellers ever, entertained King Shahriyar with stories during one thousand and one nights (You've heard of the Thousand and One Arabian Nights?). The stories of Sinbad's voyages, Aladdin and his lamp, "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" and so many others come from the collection framed by this story of Scheherezade.

Night by night, little by little, Scheherezade cured the king of his despair and cynicism. After the thousand and one nights, he proclaimed his devotion to Scheherezade and they two lived happily thereafter as king and queen.

On one level you could call this a story of Consumption versus Commitment. Shahriyar, at one virgin per day, was certainly an extraordinary consumer!

You are asking yourself why in goodness' name I chose this story for a conference on child care. Take a look at what Scheherezade accomplished through her stories. She reassured the king about two fundamental issues.

First, by the recitation of so many stories, she restored his ability to see a pattern and a meaning in life. Traditional stories share a basic satisfying structure which, regardless of the details of the particular story, assert to the listener that, in some mysterious way, life makes sense.

Second, by her patient and faithful presence, Scheherezade reassured Shahriyar that he could form basic relationships in life that could be trusted.

My experience with young children has led me to believe that these children are seeking reassurance on the same two points. One: Life makes sense. Two: There are relationships that can be trusted. And I believe that the "Good Beginnings" that this conference is rightly concerned to provide, rest on the satisfaction of these two issues.

In telling stories to pre-school children, I have observed their appetite for meaningful stories, and I have enjoyed their gratitude, their respect, and their affection in response to being told a good story.

Most likely, when you think of a story for the children you think of a book. Books for children really have not been in the picture for very long at all. For perhaps the last 150 years, technology and popular education have advanced far enough to permit and encourage the printing of plentiful and inexpensive books. Most of our words for story, "myth," "tale," "saga," refer to something that is *told*. During the last century, scholars of folklore were busy collecting these oral stories to print, so they would not be lost. One of these scholars, Joseph Jacobs, actually states in the introduction to his collection: "Generally speaking, it has been my ambition to write as a good old nurse will speak when she tells a Fairy Tale." So the child

care professionals of the past were expected to *tell* stories.

Nowadays we turn the powerful role of storyteller over to books, movies, and television. It is challenging to find the books, movies, and television programs that reassure a child that life makes sense and there are relationships that can be trusted. So often in our culture, especially, of course, in television commercials, the message is: Life makes sense and relationships can be trusted **if and only** if you use our product!

As parents and teachers we are perceived to be very powerful beings by our young children. Don't we want to use and extend our influence by giving them the gift of meaningful and delightful stories to consider?

Can you tell stories to the children in your care? (With apologies to the few men here) No power on earth can prevent a woman from doing what she is determined to do!

Winter is on its way, and there are going to be those days when you are shut inside with the kids. A perfect opportunity to start telling stories!

Sit on the floor with the kids in a circle, the wiggliest ones close beside you. Start with a story that involves *physical imitation* and simple verbal participation by the listeners. I start with The Little Red Hen. I even bring in a stalk of Kansas wheat for beginning story-listeners, and show how the kernel comes out of the chaff.

A new story that works beautifully was written by Linda Williams: The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything. (See Appendix A: "Stories for Beginning Story-tellers to Tell to Preschoolers" for more suggestions.)

I emphasize physical imitation for beginning listeners because children are *compelled* to imitate what they see you do. If you pretend to dig a hole and plant the wheat, they will copy your actions without thinking about it. Imitation is so natural to them that "Simon Says" is a *very* hard game for young children to win!

But their ability to imitate leads *beyond* physical imitation. Young children are very alert to emotions, and if you indicate a character's emotion, you will see that emotion mirrored on the faces of your young listeners. I was interested in a news article last year about behavioral scientists studying newborn babies' capacity for empathy. If one baby in the newborn nursery starts to cry, the others will imitate his emotion and chime in with him! You all have stories about the expertise toddlers display in reading and manipulating the emotions of their parents. No doubt it is an important survival skill.

A further observation about young children and emotions. Of course a young child has little practical experience in the world. But don't make the mistake of concluding that his emotional experience is narrow. How often lately have you been as angry as a baby can get? Or

as frightened? Or as delighted? As Bruno Bettelheim emphasized in his book The Uses of Enchantment, if we do not provide stories for young children that acknowledge their wide emotional experience, we cheat them of some of the most significant benefits of narrative art.

So when you tell how those lazy animals refuse to help the Little Red Hen, just show in your facial expression how exasperated she is. You'll see that expression reflected right back to you. As you tell of a character's fear, or anger, or sadness, or joy, show your physical response to those emotions by your voice tone, your facial expression, your gestures, and the children will share with you in the experience. This sharing creates an emotional bond among the listeners and between the storyteller and each listener which actually leads to a more harmonious classroom.

When I was telling the story of The Little Red Hen to my daughter, I saw another emotion on her face. Something was wrong. I had given her the roles of the dog, the cat, and the duck. But she was unhappy. She didn't want to keep saying, "Not I!" She wanted to help the Little Red Hen! So I invented the Little Red Hen's Chick, who says, "Cheep cheep. I will!" She helps the Hen and then gets to share the bread with her mama in the end. Amanda was so pleased!

When you tell a story to children you are free to watch their faces and *respond* to what you see there. A television program or even a book cannot respond. When I was five or

six I used to watch "Rin Tin Tin" on television. The setting was a calvary outpost in the old West, where a boy and his German Shepherd faced a new adventure every week. When the show approached a climax and Rin Tin Tin was in desperate danger, I couldn't stand to watch. I would hide beside the television plugging my ears with my fingers until my parents signaled me that Rinny was safe. The television could not respond to my excessive fear of the story.

In telling a scary story to children, I watch to make sure that no one is too upset. I can pat a shoulder, or wink, or smile and remind them that "It's just a story." I can even change the story to make it more suitable. Also, if I tell about a revolting or dreadful event, my facial and vocal expression show the children how a sensitive adult responds to the situation. Rather than becoming calloused to the revolting and/or dreadful, they learn an appropriate response. Watching me tell about Scheherezade, I am sure you could tell the parts I regarded as shocking or embarrassing. If you saw a movie of the story, that commentary would be lacking. If you saw that movie as a child, you might conclude that such behavior was relatively normal or even attractive.

Nowadays few children are hiding beside their televisions to avoid excessive excitement by the time they are five or six. I am concerned that children are learning to accomodate themselves to the high levels of excitement

offered by TV and movies. Subsequently as they grow older they require still stronger stimulation and more intense excitement or they are "bored." Classroom teachers are expected to be more entertaining. Recent literature for pre-teens and teenagers becomes more sensational. Adolescents imitate the behavior they have seen so powerfully advertised on television and movie screens by some of the best and highest paid talents in the country.

Why don't I limit myself to telling stories that are mild and innocuous? We have already noted the wide emotional experience of young children. Their exposure to the broad range of visual representations offered by books, movies and television has stocked their memories with diverse and sophisticated images. Their problem lies in evaluating these images and using them to interpret both inner and outer reality.

As Bettelheim elaborates in The Uses of Enchantment, the images in traditional fairy tales, both the evil and the good, are readily appropriated by children for daydream dramas and imaginative play which help to resolve the pressing conflicts children face.

Sometimes the resolution is just a matter of relieving emotion. Children can get angry that so much of their lives are controlled by adults. How satisfying for them to hear about tiny Tom Thumb outwitting grown men. How delightful when Jack overcomes a giant! Stories also offer a safety-

valve for resentment and frustration caused by sibling frictions. My middle child especially loves the story of Little One-eye, Little Two-eyes, and Little Three-eyes, where the middle daughter gets to marry the prince.

In general, a small child often feels weak and fearful of the great world. Without belittling his fears, fairy tales encourage him that benefical powers will assist him as he tackles the adventures which are essential for his developing maturity. Yes, Baba Yaga is a terrifying child-eating witch, but the little doll in Vasilisa's pocket will protect her from harm. Yes, the Beast looks dreadful, but if you persevere in kindness and truthfulness, you will find true happiness both for yourself *and for the Beast*. Yes, you haven't a clue as to where you can find The Water of Life, but that strange little man with whom you shared your bit of bread will show you the way. The failures and punishments of the wicked characters clarify and promote the choices of the good characters.

It would be injustice to the significance of these classic stories to try to pin down exactly what they say to a child. Bettelheim remarks, "As with all great art, the fairy tale's deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life." We must not make the mistake of disallowing a story because we as adults interpret it too narrowly or literally. When a two year-old visualizes the Wolf eating

Granny, he most likely pictures an almost comical gulp--especially if that's what the storyteller indicates. A four-year old doesn't fret about her shoe size when she hears "Cinderella." And, be reassured, she doesn't conclude that a real live stepmother is wicked just because she hears about wicked stepmothers in fairy tales. A five-year old doesn't think it is okay to steal just because Jack takes the giant's gold. Or if larcenous thoughts do occur to him, and the storyteller is paying attention to his response to the story, she will see that mischievous light come on and can address the question right then.

Just by sitting down with the children and sharing a story with them, you demonstrate your willingness to form a trustworthy relationship with them. By choosing to tell meaningful stories, with a range of emotions and with serious choices and consequences, you assure the children that you respect them. The responsive personal quality of storytelling further enhances the significance of the stories you tell. They become of testimonial of hope and affection from one generation to the next.

Let's get back to some techniques for making sure your story makes sense. I suggest you start with an old favorite, one you heard as a child and have read many times. Have a copy of the written story hidden close by in case you get stuck. Say to the kids: "Today I'm going to *tell* you the story of The Three Bears. I may get stuck and need your

help!" If you do get stuck and can't remember what comes next, laugh and ask the children whether they can remember. Look it up if you need to. The first time I told Amanda about Goldilocks I got stuck wondering why on earth the bears would leave the house just when their breakfast was ready.

If you want to go on to more complex stories, here are some ideas on how to learn a story. Many of these suggestions will work for preparing to tell a story from your own life. Children are always interested about incidents from their teacher's childhood. (My own children especially liked hearing how I got a spanking after my seventh birthday party for lying to my father about picking Mrs. Walker's tulips!) Just be sure to choose a story you enjoy, since your authentic appreciation of the story convinces the children it is worth their attention.

Telling a story does not mean memorizing a text and delivering it word for word. Your object is to be able to remember the characters, the setting and the actions of the story, and to describe what you remember in your own words. Begin by reading a written version of the story out loud. Next, gain some distance from the written version. Analyze the story by: 1. Listing the major characters; 2. Writing a brief description of the setting of the story; 3. Sum-marizing the problem that the story poses and resolves; and 4. Listing the sequence of actions in the story.

Next you can take some time to visualize the characters, the setting, and the actions in the story. Don't just *see* the story in your mind, *hear* the sounds, *smell* the odors, *taste* the flavors, *experience* the emotions. As tea steeps in the pot, let the story steep in your imagination. You may want to practice out loud, especially the beginning of the story. If you are so lucky as to have a small child to practice with, you can expect an appreciative audience, very tolerant of slips and hesitations. (Just think about how they laugh at the oldest jokes you know, if you need encouragement.)

Just as you have visualized the characters in your story, your listeners will form their own mental pictures of the characters. If you tell the story of The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids, who do you suppose their pictured Mama Goat will resemble? As he hears the story of Beauty and the Beast, each listener imagines the Beast differently. Later on, as Bettelheim observed, children will use personally visualized characters and events in their imaginative play as their way of considering the conflicts they face. Since the images are personal, they will bear deeper meanings for the individual child than the mass-produced images in books, movies, and television. As a further consequence, the stories will be more memorable.

Storytelling cultivates a child's listening ability, develops his ability to form personal mental images in

response to a story, and stocks his memory with a wide variety of characters and events. What better preparation could there be for appreciating the pleasures of reading on his own? What better encouragement to persevere in mastering reading skills?

Storytelling nurtures trust and affection between the teller and each listener, and among the listeners. What a pleasant way to bring harmony and a group identity to the classroom. Before long, children will realize they can tell their own stories to the class, offering their teacher and classmates the opportunity to enjoy each child's fresh and unpredictable insights (See the Bibliography: The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter).

I enjoy storytelling, and appreciate its many rewards more with every story I tell. You are a storyteller, too! Among those "Good Beginnings" that never end, which this conference is considering, I hope you will decide to include: "Once upon a time . . . ."

Appendix A

Stories for Beginning Storytellers to Tell to Preschoolers

(Ages are of course approximate, since children are more or less willing to listen depending on their temperaments, the weather, the time of day, who they are sitting next to, how much food or sleep they have had, and so forth!)

For the Youngest Listeners (2 to 6 years old):

Goldilocks
Little Red Riding Hood
The Little Red Hen
The Three Little Pigs
Little Tuppens
The Turnip
The Mitten
The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything, by Linda Williams (Published 1986)

For Young Preschoolers (3 to 6):

The Three Billy Goats Gruff
The Bun (Gingerbread Man)
The Old Woman and her Pig
Chicken Licken
The Wolf and the Seven Kids
The Bremen Town Musicians
The Shoemaker and the Elves

For Older Preschoolers (4 to 8):

From Aesop--
The Dog and His Bone
The Hare and the Tortoise
The Wind and the Sun
Town Mouse and Country Mouse
The Lion and the Mouse
The Grasshopper and the Ants
The Boy Who Cried "Wolf"
Androcles and the Lion

From Grimm--*
The Frog King
The Golden Goose
Rapunzel
Rumpelstiltskin
The Six Servants
Tom Thumb
Twelve Dancing Princesses

*These stories are more complex and will require more time for preparation, but the children's appreciation will make it worth your effort!

Note: Familiar stories that have been made into full length cartoons (*Jack and the Beanstalk, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty*) can be difficult to tell to children who have seen the movies many times. They are sure you are mistaken about how the story really goes.

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